

Narrator:

America.gov presents our conversation with Dr. Elbert Ransom, a pioneer in the American Civil Rights Movement. Dr. Ransom recently returned from an extended speaking tour in Africa, where he visited with the citizens of Ethiopia, Namibia, and Zimbabwe. Today he tells us about his experience.

Dr. Elbert Ransom:

It's been a wonderful experience, it really has. It has broadened my entire scope of humanity.

Narrator:

Dr. Elbert Ransom is a key figure in the quest for civil rights in America. He lived, worked, prayed and struggled with his contemporaries in the 1960's such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, and others. Today, Dr. Ransom continues to inspire with his message of faith and empowerment. In February 2008, he traveled to Africa as part of a speaking tour sponsored by the U.S. State Department. The experience left an impression on Dr. Ransom about the need for awareness. And not just in Africa.

Dr. Elbert Ransom:

And so the message that I had was one of self empowerment. There it seemed to be new to them. But I always prefaced whatever I had to say to make clear that we have issues in America that we are still working on. Because I didn't want to give the impression that here's this knowledgeable American who has no problems. I could give that same message right here in America in many, many communities.

Narrator:

Dr. Ransom described his experience as an African American coming to Africa, and the wonderful welcome he received.

Dr. Elbert Ransom:

I had an emotional experience reaction when I was there. I felt a belongingness. These people I looked at, and I would stand up before these audiences and I said as I cast my eyes across the field of people here I see my aunts, I see my nephews, my uncles, you know people who look like me

Narrator:

American officials describe Dr. Ransom as one the most influential and eloquent speakers to have participated in the program. His speeches drew big crowds throughout the regions where he traveled; he describes how he felt a part of the community even as a foreigner, as during his time in Ethiopia.

Dr. Elbert Ransom:

It had a welling up of something connected. Same thing in Namibia, same thing in Zimbabwe. It was like I had been here before many, many centuries ago, and I had returned. And they were so welcoming, and so receptive. It felt natural. And it didn't feel separate, because I belong to another culture in America, that's white and black, but to expand this and get to my roots, it was a very different feeling.

Narrator:

Dr. Ransom visited three countries during his month-long tour in Africa. He noted that the nations he visited represent both the diversity and the challenges faced by African communities.

Dr. Elbert Ransom:

So you got three different countries that I went to. One is very impoverished and the people seem to roll with the punches like in Ethiopia. Namibia, which stands out in my mind like a very ordered and organized country; businesses are thriving, and then go to an oppressed country like Zimbabwe. So you got three different, very distinct, different operations, and yet still they're all African.

Narrator:

Ethiopia faces development challenges to raise the standard of living of its population. Many of the day-to-day routines of the Ethiopian people were once shared by populations in America.

Dr. Elbert Ransom:

Going in for instance to Ethiopia, I was startled by the infrastructure and the many, many people who are impoverished. My heart went out to the people; there are people sleeping on the streets; unemployment is very high.

Narrator:

Dr. Ransom found many people in Ethiopia, both Christian and Muslim, who were ready to work together to address poverty.

Namibia is the most prosperous of the three nations Dr. Ransom visited. And like all nations, challenges such as lack of opportunity remain

Dr. Elbert Ransom:

Going into Namibia, it was a completely different world. It was ordered, organized, people were very literate, the flow of life seemed to have been acceptable. However, they have problems. And the people there are very mindful of that, but not very aggressive in really trying to bring some sense to it all, and that was interesting to me.

Narrator:

Even in prosperous nations like Namibia and even America, communities of faith require inspired individuals to take action. The result can be real change and improved lives, whether in 1960's America or modern-day Namibia.

In contrast to Ethiopia and Namibia, Zimbabwe presents a unique challenge, where the government has pursued a destructive path.

Dr. Elbert Ransom:

And as I get into Zimbabwe you'll see – that was the intimidation factor that I saw in those African countries. The thing that took me by surprise was to learn that the Mugabe administration were apparently very balanced in their dispensation of government and then something happened and I assume this whole thing about power corrupts absolutely and so just being there from another country, it wasn't a very pleasant feeling, I didn't feel free.

Narrator:

Countries where initiative and freedom of expression have been taken away from the population are always impoverished. With the proper government that empowers its people, Zimbabwe could use its knowledge and resources to become prosperous.

Up next – our conversation with Dr. Elbert Ransom continues – on the importance of communities of faith.

Diversity - in religion, race, and philosophy – sometimes leads to misunderstanding and conflict. And while different communities have different challenges, there are also shared problems that all humans face. Dr. Ransom explains that in some cases, cultural or religious views prevent communication that can lead to solutions.

Dr. Elbert Ransom:

And I made clear people normally don't come together because they have differences in religion because they have a different approach to theology. And so my first bit of advice is since we share this land together, we breath this air together, let's not discuss theology, we have to think in terms of the things we have in common – our humanity is common.

Narrator:

America is home to many different religions, practiced across the country in many communities. While followers may not always agree with each other, they can agree on the freedom to choose.

Dr. Elbert Ransom:

Leave theology out – because if you want to say Yao-weh and not God; you want to say Allah and not God – that's alright. Because a man or woman has a right to choose whatever faith they desire to practice and I respect that.

Narrator:

There are many conflicts in world where religion seems to be a prime cause of hatred. But positive examples prove that different religions share the same core principles of community, respect, and reverence for humanity. The American Civil Rights Movement is living proof of this.

Dr. Elbert Ransom:

And I use the Civil Rights Movement because King built the Civil Rights Movement on a combination of religious bodies so the Civil Rights Movement was really a spiritual movement

Narrator:

Ransom believes that above all, human relationships are the key to moving beyond issues of race or religion.

Dr. Elbert Ransom:

I would put my interest in making friends. Now they say that the Arabs, the Muslims – you can't talk to them. I don't believe that. I talk to Muslims in these countries like we're talking now – we talk. I say, hey guys, why don't we combine our forces.

Narrator:

Communities are made up of many faiths. In American cities, for example, you can find members of all religions living in peace. What is the community of faith based on and how does it work?

Dr. Elbert Ransom:

That is an area that we talk a lot about in America. That means Muslims sit with Christians, Jews sit with Muslims; and that's very difficult, but if you can come to the bottom line of recognizing the commonalities.

Narrator:

Recognizing that all humans share the same basic interests, such as a clean environment and proper health care forms the basis for community. And the community is made up of individual people who make choices.

Dr. Elbert Ransom:

What do you do in your own community to begin to build self-esteem and know that you can build a power base

Narrator:

The community of faith, where individuals join together to achieve a goal that leads to opportunity for future generations, is a powerful force today and in history.

Dr. Elbert Ransom:

Much can be done, and I base that on what we did in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955. We had nothing, no money, no power; I'm a firm believer in divine order and I think that somewhere in divine order, a prophet is lifted up. And that's what I think about Martin Luther King, Jr. He came and stayed a short while, wasn't a long time, but the impact – it's so unbelievable. And he just had a simple message – love. A simple message of loving.

Narrator:

Up next – the 2008 Presidential campaign and race relations in America, as our conversation with Dr. Elbert Ransom continues

The 2008 campaign for the Presidency in America is being watched closely around the world. How familiar are the citizens of African nations with the election? Dr. Ransom has the answer.

Dr. Elbert Ransom:

So the campaign here in America is of great concern to all three countries I was in. I talked about Obama, and they were ahead of me. They have taken Obama as one of theirs. You know being a civil rights activist during those days and that what I was, I cannot tell you how emotionally this campaign is affecting me. To see a woman rise to the occasion – women have struggles in this country and in the world.

Narrator:

This year's election in America represents progress for civil rights. But many of the issues under discussion – the state of the economy and equality of opportunity, and immigration, are all social issues. Barack Obama has inspired many people, but it's not because of his race.

Dr. Elbert Ransom:

And then to have this young smart black guy who embraces humanity. He didn't say "I'm a black candidate and I want to run because I want to lift the plight of black people", he said "America – let's do something different". I said that's change. And the kind of message that he has is reassuring because it's what King talked about. He thought that we had to have white brothers and white sisters and make this country greater than it really is.

Narrator:

The issue of race relations in America recently moved to the top of the news coverage. Barack Obama's former pastor in Chicago Jeremiah Wright made comments that some claimed inflamed racial hatred. Dr. Ransom gave us his reaction.

Dr. Elbert Ransom:

Jeremiah Wright, in his own crude way, mouthed what every black person in America thinks, but we're too polite, we don't say anything about it. But now it is out in the open, and I don't think this

discussion is going to go away. I think there are enough people of goodwill, of goodwill, who are not going to let this die. Because I think a lot of white people really didn't know that we felt that way.

Narrator:

Race relations in America have a long history that has shaped generations. Until the 1960's, racism in America was institutionalized in many states.

Dr. Elbert Ransom:

I can distinctly remember colored and white public water fountains. I mean I'm looking at them in my mind right now – where the colored fountains were tap water, and the white fountains were connected with electricity to chill the water. I remember those things – I remember sitting in the back of the bus and not being able to walk through the white passenger section. I remember not being able to try clothes on in department stores. If you did, you tainted it and you better buy it.

Narrator:

Despite the victories of Civil Rights activists, the social ills that characterized a divided society have not been totally wiped away.

The comments of Jeremiah Wright and Obama's speech in Philadelphia have elevated the issue of race and the connected issues of economic opportunity and education in the 2008 campaign. The struggles for basic rights during the 1960's have been replaced by a struggle for empowerment. How do communities move beyond years of prejudice to create greater opportunity for everyone?

Dr. Elbert Ransom:

We talk about all of the negatives in America. We talk about how far divided the races are and everything. I think people need to know where we've come from, but I wouldn't linger on that. So I would put my emphasis on the positives – that's what I would do. And talk about what we can do together. King always said – we must live together as brothers and sisters, or perish together, like fools. Makes sense.

Narrator:

Barack Obama's success is reflected throughout American society. Although problems remain with minority communities seeking opportunities, many examples demonstrate how empowered individuals can succeed in a free society like America.

Dr. Elbert Ransom:

I would be remiss if I told you that we have not had some gains. Number one – we have more black millionaires now than we have ever had in the history of this country. Start with Oprah Winfrey. Tiger Woods – very wealthy young man. So opportunities have come forth since I was a boy. We've

got more people in Congress now of color, and incidentally, some of these gains are not from the Civil Rights Movement, they just naturally happen.

Narrator:

Next – our conversation with Dr. Elbert Ransom continues on bringing cultures together and the importance of education

Racial division has a long history in America, but it does not define America. The diversity of American communities is a result of the world's societies coming together in one place. Sometimes this makes cross-cultural relations challenging. Ransom told his audiences in Africa that for many Americans, their identity is not always clear.

Dr. Elbert Ransom:

Confusion in the African-American community in this state is prevalent. Confusion about who really am I, what am I from, where am I from? And that was really an eye opener for them and so the people in Ethiopia said – don't look any further, you're home. People in Namibia said – don't listen to that, this is where you're from and then on and on in Zimbabwe.

Narrator:

Many Americans can claim to be from foreign lands, because of their ancestry. But inside the United States, the mix of races, religions, and ethnicities means that American culture is based more on values and shared experience. In Africa, Dr. Ransom explains how his struggles in the Civil Rights Movement affected his relationship to the local population – who face challenges of their own.

Dr. Elbert Ransom:

And I felt I could relate to them because I feel what they feel - just naturally, they don't have to explain it to me. And they said to me, you know, you're where we are. And I said, I know. We're the same people. The white people aren't any different. They have emotions and things of that nature, and the reason we have conflict is that we don't know each other. We need to have more dialogue. We were made to be in relationships – without a doubt. I learn what you know, you learn what I know

Narrator:

Dialogue and communication are the major tools of empowerment and of building relationships, whether between nations or within small communities.

Dr. Elbert Ransom:

One theme that was common – why don't we have a closer relationship with African Americans. We don't have a relationship with Africans. They have notions about African-Americans. They all love the idea. I said we've got to be creative. Let's think about how do we begin to bring these cultures together.

Narrator:

Bringing cultures together and expanding cultural horizons is not only a good social idea. We now live in a globalized economy facing international environment and economic risks. Empowerment of citizens is now more than ever a requirement to maintain healthy communities. How is that achieved?

Dr. Elbert Ransom:

And I have to go back to the very basic impetus for really succeeding in life and finding the variables to really integrate your thoughts with other thoughts and that is education.

Narrator:

The American Civil Rights Movement demonstrates the possibilities of education. Those victories were not achieved through force of arms, but through awareness and solidarity.

Dr. Elbert Ransom:

I even became more convinced when I was in Africa that Martin Luther King Jr. did not do this by himself in America. But what he did come with was a breadth of education. He had to educate people and build people to educate others. One, about their deprivations – a lot of black people in America didn't even realize that they were being deprived. I mean I was mistreated in the south where I grew up and what have you, but it was a way of life and nobody really complained about it. But education – to have people understand what they're living under and what they can do to be self empowered and not a lot of that has been done even here in America.

Narrator:

The skills needed to promote prosperity and build global communities to address common challenges are not necessarily technical in nature. Ransom explains that in Africa, like all nations, technical expertise needs to be complemented by human understanding, even in more advanced nations like Namibia

Dr. Elbert Ransom:

Namibia, like any other African country, needs to concentrate on the institutions that prepare minds for future. And this education ought to be inclusive – I mean the world is smaller because of high technology. We need a better understanding of the world we live in, the people, etc. I think we need to expand opportunities to travel, to have people go and see for themselves and taste the land. I think it changes your whole operation as far as interrelatedness to people. You begin to see humanity.

Narrator:

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